

# So far from the Andes: Black-and-white Tanager *Conothraupis speculigera*, an unexpected vagrant to French Guiana

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Received 26 September 2011

**SUMMARY.**—A male Black-and-white Tanager *Conothraupis speculigera* was mist-netted on 20 March 2011 at Awala-Yalimapo, north-west French Guiana (05°44'N, 53°55'W), 3,000 km east of its breeding areas and >2,800 km from its principal non-breeding range. This is the first record for north-east South America, and the first away from its restricted breeding range during the nesting period. The alternative hypotheses of exceptionally long-distance vagrancy or the existence of an unknown breeding population between the Andes and French Guiana, are discussed.

The genus *Conothraupis* comprises two range-restricted, medium-sized tanagers, Black-and-white Tanager *C. speculigera* and Cone-billed Tanager *C. mesoleuca*. Males are characterised by their contrasting black and white plumage with a white speculum at the base of the primaries, strikingly reminiscent of some *Sporophila* seedeaters (Isler & Isler 1999, Witt 2005). Females are much duller, predominantly olive in *C. speculigera* and dull brown in *C. mesoleuca*.

*C. speculigera* breeds in southern Ecuador, mainly in the provinces of Loja and El Oro, and north-west Peru, south to La Libertad, where it occurs mainly during the rainy season in February–May (O'Neill 1966, Best *et al.* 1993, Ridgely & Greenfield 2001, Greeney *et al.* 2006, Ingels 2007, Schulenberg *et al.* 2007). During the non-breeding season, it undertakes a unique trans-Andean migration, south-east into south-west lowland Amazonia, mainly to central and eastern Peru (Isler & Isler 1999, Ridgely & Tudor 2009). It hardly reaches western Brazil, where the species has been recorded only at Seringal Oriente and at Valparaíso on the upper rio Juruá in Acre (Stotz 1990, Whittaker & Oren 1999), and it is only a rare visitor to north-west Bolivia, with one record at Alto Madidi in dpto. La Paz (Parker *et al.* 1991) and an unpublished record in dpto. Cochabamba (S. K. Herzog *in litt.* 2011). Although it commonly nests in secondary habitats in southern Ecuador (Ridgely & Greenfield 2001, Ingels 2007), the species' restricted range, disjunct distribution and possible decline due to loss and degradation of its breeding habitat has led to this tanager being listed as Near Threatened (BirdLife International 2000, 2011).

Given its community of active birdwatchers, new bird species for French Guiana are added annually (Renaudier & CHG 2010, Renaudier *et al.* 2010). However, the capture of a subadult male Black-and-white Tanager at Awala-Yalimapo in north-west French Guiana on 20 March 2011, must rank as one of the most unexpected national 'firsts' to date.

## Locality and circumstances

Awala-Yalimapo is in westernmost coastal French Guiana, c.10 km from the border with Suriname in north-east South America. The study site (05°44'N, 53°55'W), locally known as 'la digue' or 'la digue de Panato', is located between the villages of Awala and

Yalimapo. It comprises a dry area on white sand with bushes and low trees, and traditional Amerindian cultures of manioc, surrounded by vast marshes almost at sea level.

The bird was mist-netted during STOC (Suivi Temporel des Oiseaux Communs: Pineau in prep.) surveys on behalf of the Groupe d'Étude et de Protection des Oiseaux en Guyane (GEPOG). Three times p.a. ten mist-nests are erected at the same places within the study area for two consecutive days, covering a total area of c.2 ha. The mist-nets are operated from midday to dusk and the following day from dawn to midday. The net where the bird was caught was placed among bushes and near trees bordering an old manioc 'field'. The Black-and-white Tanager was caught at 08.30 h. When MC brought it to the ringing table none of us could identify the bird.

## Description

The bird's general morphology and bill shape and colour clearly indicated it to be a tanager. Its size was approximately that of a *Tachyphonus* or large *Thraupis*, but the glossy black upperparts and head, white lower breast and belly, grey flanks and rump, and striking white speculum at the base of the primaries readily eliminated all species known in French Guiana (Figs. 1–2). The speculum was formed by a clear-cut white patch at the bases of pp3–7 and restricted to the inner web of p8 (numbered descendently). The secondaries also possessed a white basal patch on their inner webs, forming a concealed wingbar. The grey rump and flanks were washed green. In addition, the bird had a concealed white coronal patch, black thighs, dark red eyes, black legs and a dark grey maxilla with a contrasting pale grey mandible. Reference to Restall *et al.* (2006) and Ridgely & Tudor (2009) permitted the bird's identification as a male Black-and-white Tanager. Biometrics: total length 170 mm, wing (flattened) 79 mm, tail 67 mm, mass 25.5 g; belly feathered, and no cloacal protuberance or incubation patch. It exhibited significant fat on the breast (furculum), flanks and axillaries, scoring 3 on a scale of 0–4.

The plumage appeared fresh, in 'perfect' condition and showed no signs of wear or active moult. Traces of green on the rump and flanks, presumably remnants of immature plumage, as well as the pointed rectrices, suggest that the bird was a subadult male with



Figures 1–2. Male Black-and-white Tanager *Conothraupis speculigera*, Awala-Yalimapo, French Guiana, 20 March 2011 (Maxime Cobigo); the missing rectrix was collected for DNA.

retained juvenile tail feathers, although the latter showed no sign of wear nor a distinct coloration. However, the body plumage was almost entirely that of an adult, as were the dark red eyes (Ridgely & Tudor 2009).

The bird was measured, photographed and ringed (Paris SC164426) before being released. On flying into the adjacent understorey, its grey rump was conspicuous.

## Discussion

The locality in French Guiana where the Black-and-white Tanager was trapped is 3,000 km east of its breeding range and >2,800 km from its principal non-breeding range. Our record is the longest-distance vagrancy recorded and further demonstrates the species' highly migratory capabilities. Vagrants can clearly be expected elsewhere between its breeding grounds and French Guiana, for example in Colombia, central Amazonian Brazil or Venezuela. A specimen collected on 16 October 1969 in dpto. Putumayo in southern Colombia (Verhelst *et al.* in prep.) is the only record for the country, and is sited on a direct line between the breeding grounds and French Guiana, but 'only' 400 km north-east of the species' breeding areas. There are no records for Venezuela, or central and northern Brazil (Hilty 2003, Ascanio 2009, Pacheco & Agne 2010; D. Ascanio, F. Brammer & J. Kvarnäck *in litt.* 2011). Two males observed in dpto. Cochabamba, central Bolivia, in September 2004 (S. K. Herzog & R. Soria-Auza), 1,700 km from the breeding grounds, represent the longest known movement in a south-easterly direction. Like other migrants, Black-and-white Tanagers are liable to appear outside their usual range, but the distance covered by the Awala bird, in an 'aberrant' north-east direction, is exceptional.

Our record in French Guiana could indicate the existence of a previously unknown population somewhere between the Andes and French Guiana. In such a case, the distance travelled by the Awala bird might not be so great. In late March, this tanager should have been on its breeding grounds. However, Black-and-white Tanager is known to breed only west of the Andes, with all records from east of the Andes being in the non-breeding season (see above). The French Guianan record is the first 'breeding-season' record away from the known breeding range. By modelling environmental characteristics of the known distribution of *C. speculigera*, Verhelst *et al.* (in prep.) highlight a potential area of occurrence in the pantepui of south-east Venezuela and western Guyana. Our record was c.700 km further east. However, the model does not discriminate between breeding and non-breeding data, thus the potential distribution includes non-breeding areas.

Although pertaining to two distinct biomes, i.e. dry deciduous montane forest and lowland humid forest, respectively, breeding and non-breeding habitats share certain characteristics (O'Neill 1966). On its breeding grounds, the species occurs in scrubby secondary habitats and clearings within deciduous woodlands, mainly at 500–1,700 m. Such arid habitats are frequented only in the wet season (Best *et al.* 1993, Ridgely & Greenfield 2001, Ingels 2007, Schulenberg *et al.* 2007). Non-breeding, dry-season habitats are more diverse, as the species has been found in xerophytic brushy habitats (O'Neill 1966), riparian thickets and the understorey of riparian forest in south-east Peru and north-east Bolivia (Ridgely & Greenfield 2001, Hennessey *et al.* 2003). The habitat at Awala-Yalimapo matches breeding and non-breeding habitats, comprising mixed, dry brushy and woody white-sand secondary vegetation surrounded by a marsh, thus combining all relevant characteristics, except perhaps altitude.

Finally, there is the question of whether the bird reached French Guiana naturally or if it was an escaped cagebird. Despite its IUCN status, the species is not listed by CITES, making trade legal. While such trade is rather low over most of South America (FAO 2011), the capture and keeping of cagebirds is widespread in the Guianas (Andel *et al.* 2003, Hanks



2005, Mittermeier *et al.* 2010). Local Amerindians and immigrant Surinamese in French Guiana often keep wild songbirds in cages, and frequent movements of people between neighbouring countries, as well as illegal trade, mean that a bird caught in Surinam or Brazil could have been brought to French Guiana. However, the possibility for a cagebird to be carried or traded from Peru or Ecuador to French Guiana appears very low, considering the distance and absence of regular exchange between these countries. Moreover, Black-and-white Tanager is unknown in captivity in Ecuador and Surinam (J. F. Ortiz & M. Sánchez *in litt.* 2011, A. Spaans *vide* J. Ingels *in litt.* 2011).

Despite the date of the French Guiana record being within the species' breeding season, fat accumulation on the bird was also typical of a migrant bird at the onset of migration. Its fresh plumage suggests that it had stayed in the area to moult, and that it was mist-netted potentially just prior to departure. Based on this, the Comité d'Homologation de Guyane validated the record as the first for French Guiana, and has included Black-and-white Tanager in category A of the country's bird list, i.e. a species of wild origin recorded since 1992.

### Acknowledgements

Our observation was made during a bird survey on behalf of the Groupe d'Étude et de Protection des Oiseaux en Guyane (GEPOG), funded by the Direction de l'Environnement, de l'Aménagement et du Logement (DEAL). Juan Carlos Verhelst, John Bates and David Willard kindly provided a copy of their paper in preparation. Frederik Brammer, François Catzélis, Sebastian K. Herzog, Stefan Kreft, Kévin Pineau and Manuel Plenge assisted with references. Useful discussions or information were contributed by David Ascanio, John Bates, Frederik Brammer, Johan Ingels, Guy Kirwan, John Kvarnäck, Alexander Lees, Guillaume Léotard, Juan Freile Ortiz, Jessica Oswald, Manuel Sánchez and Thomas Valqui. Travis Rosenberry (Peregrine Fund) generously provided some papers. We are grateful to all of them.

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